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Colonialism, Imperialism & Animal Liberation



wherever we face it and is often readily avoidable, so we don't have to marginalize ourselves in society or act in highly impractical ways in order to withdraw from its perpetuation. Instead, a sharp critique of capitalist practices such as industrialized animal farming can be used as a launching point for a wholesale attack on capitalism as a system. There are synergies abound comrades, and we should all support each other in building a strong, multi-faceted and vibrant movement that challenges the dominant ideologies of present society on all fronts on which they conflict with freedom and well-being.

Veganism, as an ethical choice, is thus a consistent complement to activism in the quest to end human domination over and exploitation of non-human animals. It transcends cultures, in the same way that other forms of oppression should be resisted no matter where they persist. All cultures are living and constantly evolving, and can from within their own cultural understanding find the tools and means through which speciesism, racism, sexism, capitalism or any other form of domination can be opposed. Everyone who opposes domination should find it within their interest to engage in or at least support the anti-speciesist struggle, for what more severe form of domination could we imagine than the notion that it is acceptable to harm and kill sentient beings because one likes their taste?

[1] The Wretched of the Earth – Frantz Fanon

[2] Racism Versus Speciesism: A Moral Battleground? – Katrina Fox

[3] Indigenous Veganism: Feminist Natives Do Eat Tofu – Margaret Robinson

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Written by Cetian

Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence. – Frantz Fanon [1]

It is, in theory, not necessary to point out the brutality and violence permeating the colonial and imperialist projects of various societies as they have come and gone throughout history. The arcs on which these events are documented are, as Marx said of capitalism, *dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt*. But in practice, the only danger lies in not retelling this story enough rather than in telling it too often.

Whether we are talking about Africans, enslaved and brought to the Americas as a tool for imperialist interests, native Americans robbed of their land, their freedom and ultimately their lives, the utter misery in Kongo under Belgian rule, or British imperialism in India, the underlying themes share a striking similarity. The bodies of the conquered were objectified as machines to do the work of their new masters, the land and riches were confiscated while the cultures and societies, in many cases, torn apart and destroyed. To accomplish this, an entire philosophy of domination was applied through a brutal and multilayered web of racism, sexism, religious persecution and cultural universalism strictly from the perspective of the conquerors. The cultures and practices of the natives were vilified and demonized (sometimes literally, as in the form of witch hunts), while atrocious behavior on the part of the invading empires – both at home and in their new colonies – was often explained as justified or even necessary.

It is no wonder, then, that anarchism is by very definition opposed to these practices of domination and that anarchists are among the foremost critics of this process and its lingering effects. This is very much the case also for anarchists engaged in the animal liberation struggle, as several parallels can be drawn in the way that the highly diminished status of non-human animals could be used as a platform to dehumanize and delegitimize the conquered populations and their cultures. With animals already neatly fit into the narrative of being mere tools and objects for human exploitation, labeling the colonized populations as animals immediately brought to life the desired associations.

Despite this, some would like to fit the animal liberation struggle into the imperialist project, as a form of cultural imperialism, turning such anarchists or other animal liberation activists into proponents of one of the things they abhor the

most. It is often the strong advocacy for total abstention from animal exploitation – veganism – that results in accusations of racism and imperialism. How dare we force western values upon indigenous cultures and societies?

This is a serious accusation, and one understandably perceived as insulting for many engaged in the anti-speciesist struggle. But ultimately it is one worth dealing with, because doing so sheds some light on some of the implicit assumptions within the accusation itself. To start with, imperialism, and all its destructive tools, was a means of dominating others, and asserting one culture above another. Veganism, in this sense, is *acultural*. It doesn't apply double standards by letting something slide in one place but not the other, it doesn't try to establish cultural hierarchies and it is not looking to establish domination. On the contrary, it is the dismantling of domination, in all its forms, that vegan anarchists seek. We wouldn't accept cultural expressions involving slavery, patriarchy or economic exploitation – no matter what culture we are talking about – so why should we accept any additional forms of domination in one place but not the other? Gary L. Francione, an animal liberation proponent, answers this accusation succinctly:

Those in this group beg the question and assume that speciesism is justified. That is, their position amounts to the view that it is racist or culturally insensitive to seek to protect the interests of another marginalized and particularly vulnerable group, nonhuman animals. I would imagine that most of those who have this view would not object if the marginalized beings were other humans. But this is just another way of asserting human supremacy and exceptionalism. I find that as objectionable as asserting racial supremacy. [2]

If anything, vegan anarchists espouse values that are strongly in conflict with contemporary western culture, and most efforts are rightly aimed at western societies because this is where a significant part of the severe exploitation of non-human animals takes place. Not only that, it is in many cases western influence that increases – or at least exerts a cultural and economical pressure to do so – levels of animal exploitation in societies that peruse no or relatively small amounts of animal products, such as is the case in India and among Jainists in particular. No vegan anarchists want to take away people's means of subsistence. The claim is rather that whoever has the practical prerequisites – economic, environmental, social – ought to choose not to harm sentient beings for nearly arbitrary reasons such as old habits and taste preferences.

In fact, by trying to apply imperialist connotations to proponents of veganism, one unwittingly positions western cultures as the subject, and indigenous cultures as the object. As if the western culture is dynamic, always changing and open to questioning, while the indigenous cultures are static and confined to the state in which colonial powers found them hundreds of years ago, unable to evolve and unable to challenge their own norms and thus develop. Indeed, as Margaret Robinson, a vegan of indigenous background, points out:

When veganism is constructed as white, First Nations people who choose a meatless diet are portrayed as sacrificing cultural authenticity. This presents a challenge for those of us who see our vegan diets as ethically, spiritually and culturally compatible with our indigenous traditions. [3]

The push against speciesist thinking should transcend cultural boundaries, as should any global struggle against oppression, thus uniting the participants across such divides. Questioning part of cultures on grounds of oppression – from within or without – is only hypocritical when done in the traditional guise of ignoring the same issues at home. But here vegans and anarchists are adamant, and emphasize the injustice in western culture as one of the large causes for the problem in the first place. In many of the indigenous legends, the use of animals was seen as a sacrifice, which was done out of necessity, not out of the ability to dominate. Many of these cultures have been pushed beyond such a relationship with nature, and as such can within their own spiritual and cultural heritage find arguments for moving beyond the objectified relationship with animals often imposed by imperialist conquest. In other words, when the material conditions no longer necessitate the exploitation of non-human animals for survival, the indigenous traditions can in many cases be seen as an argument *for* veganism, and not against it.

When people single out veganism for this type of critique, typically also calling it a form of consumerism, they mistake it for being promoted as *the one and only* solution to a problem. But I don't have to think that abstaining from buying slaves, by itself, would stop the slave trade, to think that it would be unethical for me to participate in trading slaves. Consequently, activism and veganism are two components to reach one goal – the end of human domination of non-human animals.

While the activist component of animal liberation promotes agitation, direct action and similar activities, veganism is a way of *already living in the now* without being complicit in the perpetuation of the exploitation, which, besides showing that our ends can be our means, also shows that it is a viable alternative, and as such paves the way for others to follow suit. The burden of proof should be on the participants in the animal exploitation cycle to show that despite their participation, their choices have no negative net effect whatsoever on the well-being of sentient creatures. Because if their choices do have such consequences, and there is a practical alternative that doesn't, then clearly that alternative is a better choice. This is especially true if said alternative synergizes with the wider struggle against domination.

There is a difference here between on the one hand anti-capitalist struggle and on the other hand anti-speciesist struggle. While capitalism permeates our entire society, and can be very hard or even counter-productive to fully distance oneself from, our domination of other animals is literally advertising its own presence